



Tall, Dark, and Handsome

Despite their great size and increased numbers, moose remain a mostly mysterious presence in Montana's forests.

BY BEN LONG

MICHAELFRANCISPHOTO.COM



glamorous as bighorns and elk, nor as populous as whitetails and muleys. Yet *Alces alces* is one of the world's grand big game animals, an icon of the North Woods. Montana is one of only 12 states with a moose population and provides more hunting opportunities than almost anywhere south of Canada.

I like an animal that demands respect. In

1998, when on his morning stroll he irked a rutting bull.

Moose—the word is derived from an Algonquin term meaning “eater of twigs”—range across the northern hemisphere, often in tundra and boreal forest. Here in Big Sky Country, they live in mountain meadows, river valleys, and willow flats west of a line

only twice in Montana, once near the mouth of the Milk River and again close to the Continental Divide near today's town of Lincoln. Likewise, the moose is largely absent from the Montana journals of Canadian explorer David Thompson, who traipsed northwestern Montana in the early 1800s.

Veteran outdoorsman Gary Sloan, who

“It doesn't happen right away, but usually you see moose coming in 15 to 20 years or so after a logging or a burn.”

my local barbershop, there's an old black-and-white photo of a cowboy who was foolish enough to enter a corral containing a moose at Spotted Bear on the South Fork of the Flathead. The moose has kicked the cowboy with its front hoof into the air like a football. Moose may appear docile, but they can be deceptively dangerous. Last winter, a half-blind bull near Columbia Falls kicked snowmobiles and treed skiers. Tragically, a man was killed near his Red Lodge cabin in

running roughly south along the Rocky Mountain Front then southeast to the Beartooth Range. The moose is an animal that hunters in Montana, Sweden, Siberia, and China all have in common.

Surprisingly, more of the massive ungulates exist today than before European settlement. Montana's early explorers rarely mentioned moose. Members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, for example, saw countless elk and bison, but noted “mooce-deer”

grew up near Troy, recalls the stir created when a moose waltzed through his family's homestead shortly before World War II. “The whole town came out to see it,” says Sloan, now in his 70s. “We had never seen a moose before. Nobody had.” Fortunately, that has changed. FWP biologists estimate that Montana is now home to about 4,800 moose, and the population is stable in most of the animal's range.

FWP biologist Jerry Brown says two main

Karen and I were newlyweds basking in a balmy autumn afternoon in the Paradise Valley—and not the only ones with romance on our minds as we strolled the banks of the Yellowstone River. We heard a crash in the cottonwood thicket immediately behind us. Something big was closing in fast.

A panicky mule deer doe burst into the open ahead of us, moving full out, eyes rolling. The deer ran past so close we could feel the vibrations as her hooves struck the earth before she splashed across the river channel. A thought occurred to me: I wonder what she's running from?

“Moose!” Karen shouted. We ducked low as a massive bull moose thundered past in pur-

suit, his black flanks wet as a race horse's, bloodshot eyes bulging from their sockets, dewlap flapping wildly. If he saw us, he never let on. He just shot across the river, straight after the doe—who seemed to like her males not quite that tall, dark, and handsome.

That's one of the great things about moose: You never know what to expect.

DEMANDS RESPECT

Despite its great size, Montana's largest deer species is somehow hidden in the shadow of the state's other big game. Moose are not as

BIG RACK, BIG SCHNOZZLE

The antlers on the Alaskan moose subspecies can weigh 75 pounds and extend 70 inches wide. Those on the Shiras subspecies (left) found in Montana are smaller, though still impressive. The moose's characteristic long face and overhanging muzzle are perfectly suited to the animal's behavior and environment. “That large muzzle allows a moose to neatly, even delicately, strip tender green leaves from branches and willow shoots,” wrote Erwin A. Bauer in *Antlers: Nature's Majestic Crown*. It also allows moose to “feed selectively on submerged vegetation...keeping its eyes well above the water line. That way a cow can watch out for her calf and any potential predators as well.”





MICHELLEFRANCO/PHOTO.COM

factors have made Montana more moose-friendly over the past 100 years: logging and fire. Moose survive best in forests with plenty of shrubby browse such as willow and aspen. This vegetation grows profusely in the wake of fires, logging, and other forest disturbances. “Fires in the late 1800s and early 1900s were probably responsible for the initial expansion of moose across western Montana,” Brown says. The next expansions came after the logging heydays from the 1950s through ’70s. Moose benefited greatly. The animals need pockets of mature forests, particularly as shelter during hard winters, but they feed primarily on second-growth forest vegetation. “The fires we have seen in recent years, such as the ones up the North Fork of the Flathead, should prove beneficial for moose,” Brown says. “It doesn’t happen right away, but usually you see moose coming in 15 to 20 years after a logging or a burn.”

Lacking funds for moose research and thorough population monitoring, biologists know far less about moose than they do elk and deer. For instance, it is still unclear why moose calf survival dipped in the 1990s. Scientists do know that moose naturally exist at much lower densities than other Montana big game. Moose have adapted to the cold North Woods and evolved to reproduce slowly to prevent overwhelming the limits of their habitat. FWP biologists estimate that for every 27 elk and 135 deer in Montana, there is only a single moose.

THE BIGGEST DEER

Moose are the largest of all cervids, in Montana averaging 800 to 1,000 pounds for bulls and 600 to 800 pounds for cows. That’s four times heavier than a deer and slightly larger than an elk. (I know hunters who swear they have packed out moose that weighed a

Writer Ben Long lives in Kalispell, where he can be spotted drinking Moose Drool beer at Moose’s Saloon.

MAJESTIC RACKS Like all members of the deer family, bull moose shed their antlers each winter and grow a new set each summer. That an animal can grow something so large in just a few months is one of the most astonishing feats of the natural world. The palmated bone structures attract cows, intimidate rivals, and may even enhance hearing. Antlers are also used to catch and hold an opponent during rutting matches, in which two bulls lock antlers and push forward into each other, testing their strength.

ton, perhaps two tons by the time they hauled it back to the truck, but they never had a scale to prove it.) Moose stand 5 to 6 feet tall at the shoulder, which angles up from the hips.

Moose have long legs, allowing them to wade through deep snow and wetlands and over blown-down timber. The animal’s bulbous nose hangs over its mouth. Its coat is dark brown to black, which helps absorb heat in midwinter. Below the chin is a fleshy expansion of skin called the dewlap, or bell. I once saw a bull near the Fisher River with a dewlap that dangled nearly to its knees. Biologists don’t know exactly what this fleshy beard does. It may be a display organ that enhances the profile of the head and neck. Or it could be a scent dispenser. During the rut, bulls roll around in basins of urine known as wallow pits, and the dewlap waves the funky perfume around.

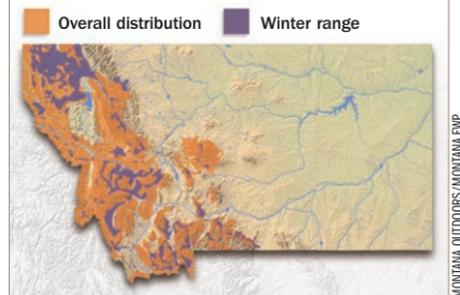
Predators play a role in moose populations, though biologists aren’t sure to what extent. Moose predators include people (hunters and highway drivers), wolves, cougars, and bears. Both black and grizzly bears eat calves, but grizzlies are also known to knock down and kill adult moose they ambush in riverside thickets. Wolves can limit moose numbers, particularly in parts of North America where the large ungulates are the only food source. In Montana, moose benefit from the fact that wolves also prey on deer and elk.

Human hunters in Montana are limited by a special permit lottery. Every year, FWP issues about 600 permits from roughly 23,000 applicants, making the overall chance of drawing a moose tag about 40:1 (the odds vary among hunting districts.)

Biologists divide North American moose into four subspecies: Alaskan, eastern Canadian, western Canadian, and Shiras. The subspecies in Montana are named for George Shiras III, a Pennsylvania congressman who was also a conservationist and a pioneer in wildlife photography. The Shiras is the smallest moose subspecies. The antler spread on a

Montana moose distribution

The state’s largest deer family member lives in mountain meadows, river valleys, and willow flats in the state’s western third from Canada to the Absarokas.



MONTANA OUTDOORS/MONTANA FWP

mature bull in Montana will run 45 inches, while an Alaskan bull may sport antlers 60 to 70 or more inches across.

But even 45 inches is impressive, and the racks of Montana bulls are increasingly attracting attention. “Compared to 20 or 30 years ago, hunters are more and more interested in looking for a large bull,” says Brown. “Back then, hunters usually took the first bull they came across. Now people put more time in, looking for just the right one.”

Moose hunters in Big Sky Country have a reasonable chance of seeing their name in the trophy antler record books. Montana has roughly 165 Shiras moose entered in the Boone & Crockett records for trophy big game killed with a firearm. Though fewer than half the number recorded from Wyoming, it’s about equal to the trophies registered from Idaho and considerably more than other states with Shiras moose, including Washington, Colorado, and Utah.

Bull moose do not grow antlers for hat-racks. Those sweeping, palmated annual growths of new bone are primarily showpieces to woo females and intimidate competing males. Moose antlers may also act as giant funnels that capture distant sounds—like cupping your hands against your ears—and improve the moose’s already excellent hearing.

One fall backpacking trip, I saw a mature bull on Fifty Mountain with one antler sheared off near the base. I had to wonder what kind of furious battle that bull endured. As sports columnists would say, it was a season-ending injury.

Moose hunting is not easy, but it’s not as

grueling as hunting elk. According to FWP, the success rates for moose and elk are roughly 80 percent and 25 percent respectively. Montana moose hunters spend on average ten days afield before filling their tag. Elk hunters put in an average of 31 days before a kill. The differences may have more to do with the nature of hunters than of the quarry. Some hunters buy an elk tag “just in case” they see one while deer hunting, but they don’t seriously pursue elk. Most moose hunters spend decades applying for a permit and are more serious about their hunt.

Moose have a largely undeserved reputation as being dimwitted. To get a rough measure of an animal’s intelligence, scientists measure brain capacity and compare it to body size. By this standard, the intellectual

capacity of moose is similar to that of horses, and moose are even brainier than elk. Some moose have even been harness-broken and trained to pull wagons.

HALF-TON HOUSE GUEST

Moose can also become urbanized, like the mule deer in Helena and elk in West Yellowstone. In the 1990s, several moose spent winters in Whitefish eating landscaping shrubs. They became so habituated to people that one resident lured a moose inside his living room with a bowlful of corn chips. The fellow is lucky he didn’t end up like the cowboy at Spotted Bear.

Montana Indians such as the Kootenai traditionally hunted moose if they had the opportunity, such as when the animals were

bogged down in deep snow or water. Hunters reached floundering moose on snowshoes or in canoes, killing the animals with arrows or spears. Today, most moose hunters practice still-hunting. They watch shrubby old burns and clear-cuts through binoculars at dawn and dusk for signs of feeding moose. Then they approach from downwind for a closer shot. Some hunters prowl forest roads, hoping to find a moose close to the truck so they don’t have to haul it too far. Others try calling in bulls during the rut.

I have tracked moose to their day beds in the snow, but they usually smell or hear me

before I see them. Moose droppings are distinctive. The pellets are large and coarse, filled with tiny woody chips. Moose tracks have the classic cloven-hoof shape of deer and elk but are larger and more pointed. It can be difficult to tell a moose track from an elk track in soft snow. I look for the moose’s long dark guard hairs, particularly in beds. Like deer and elk, moose rub their antlers on brush and saplings, but I’ve found that willow shrubs get thrashed more than any other woody species.

Killing an animal as large as a moose is serious business. Any rifle or archery setup adequate for bull elk is probably suitable for

moose. Think .30-06 and up. Long shots are generally unnecessary. Sloan, the Troy outdoorsman, has taken a couple of moose and dozens of elk. He recommends using premium bullets such as the venerable Nosler Partition and aiming carefully so the shot goes through the rib cage and perforates both lungs. Just as important is to bring the proper tools and appropriate knowledge for field butchering, along with friends and—if you can get it—pack stock. As with all big game, cool the meat quickly and get it out of the field promptly.

Brown and other FWP biologists say the

future of moose in Montana is tied to habitat. Where young, shrubby forests mature into tall timber, moose populations fade out. Where logging and fires convert old stands to shrubfields and second growth, moose numbers will likely expand.

Optimistic that moose populations will remain healthy, I plan to keep my binoculars handy and continue applying for those special hunting permits. Even if I never draw a permit, I’m happy to know that my family and I will still have opportunities to see and admire this majestic and always-surprising monarch of Montana. 🐻

MONTANA’S EARLY MOOSE MANAGEMENT

In the early years of statehood, moose numbers in Montana dropped so low that hunting seasons were stopped. In a 1974 *Montana Outdoors* article, wildlife biologist Philip Schladweiler wrote: “Montana moose hunting was first regulated in 1872, with an annual closed season from February 1 to August 15. Hunting was banned year-round in 1897 following an apparent decline in numbers. Moose numbers evidently reached a statewide low around 1900. The 1909-10 biennial report of the Depart-

ment of Fish and Game estimated a statewide population of 300 moose, whereas ‘ten years ago these animals were practically extinct in the state.’ The largest herd in 1910 was found in the Foss Fork area of Rock Creek in Granite County.”

Due primarily to the abundance of shrubby willow and aspen browse that sprouted up following a series of massive fires in the early 1900s, moose numbers began to increase. Schladweiler continued, “As early as the winter of 1935-36, a Forest Service study in the Absaroka National Forest (now part of the Gallatin National Forest) just north of Yellowstone National Park reported seriously overbrowsed areas and a high percentage of dead willows.”

Montana began considering the reinstatement of moose harvest in the early 1940s following documentation of deteriorating range due to overbrowsing in the Absaroka Primitive Area. “Despite a 1942 recommendation for controlled moose harvests which resulted from this study,” Schladweiler continued, “legislation enabling Fish and Game Commissioners to set moose seasons was not enacted until 1945. In that same fall, the first open moose season in nearly 50 years occurred.”

Moose hunter, circa 1900



HEADING HOME Long legs allow a cow and her calf to easily cross a shallow lake in the upper Rock Creek area near Philipsburg. Biologists say that as long as suitable habitat exists, moose should continue to thrive in wet and forested regions of western Montana.